

Language Proficiency Revisited: Concept and Assessment

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Language Proficiency Revisited: Concept and Assessment

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I. Introduction

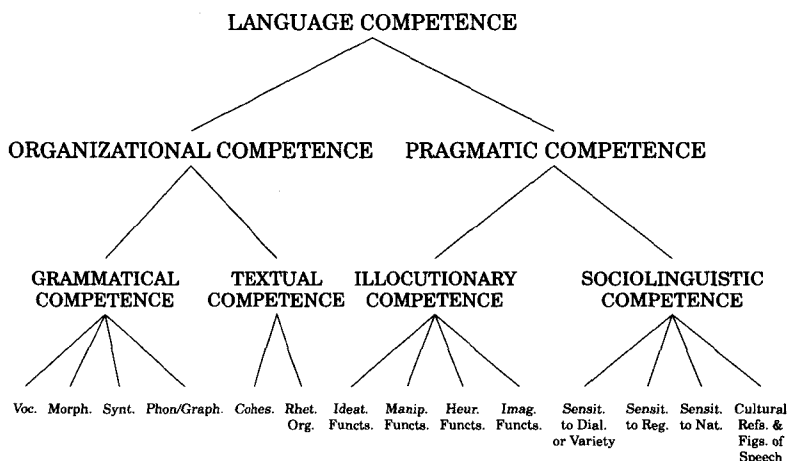
In Japan, there have been few studies conducted on methods of measuring second language ability. Nationwide, written grammar tests and reading comprehension tests have been traditionally popular; however, listening skills tests have become popular recently and they are occasionally being included on some tests. Since language teaching began to shift its focus towards more communicative competence, the means of evaluation needs to be revised in accordance with these changes in curriculum. School administrators must investigate new assessment tools, or the present situation will remain the same in the long run. In this paper, the author attempts to review recent movements in methods of assessment of second language proficiency mainly in North America, and to make some suggestions for the improvement of language proficiency tests in Japan.

II. Definition of Language Proficiency

Defining language proficiency is a very difficult and complex task, since it involves a variety of factors related to psychological and educational issues. Recently, the trend is to consider language to be more than a collection of segments of knowledge including grammar, lexicon, syntax, etc. Researchers and educators must come up with a method to judge whether a student can function in the context of social environments. In 1980, Canale and Swain developed a communicative competence framework, which has influenced many researchers. Initially,

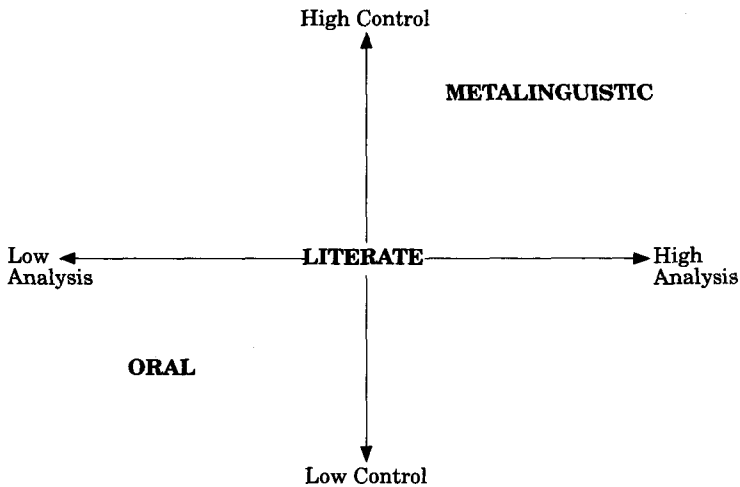
Canale and Swain stated that language competence encompasses three areas: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Later on, Canale revised this concept and added a fourth area: discourse competence(1984).

In 1990, Bachman described language proficiency by way of creating two main categories with two subcategories each (p. 87). The two main categories of language competence, according to Bachman, consist of; organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes grammatical competence and textual competence. Pragmatic competence includes illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence.



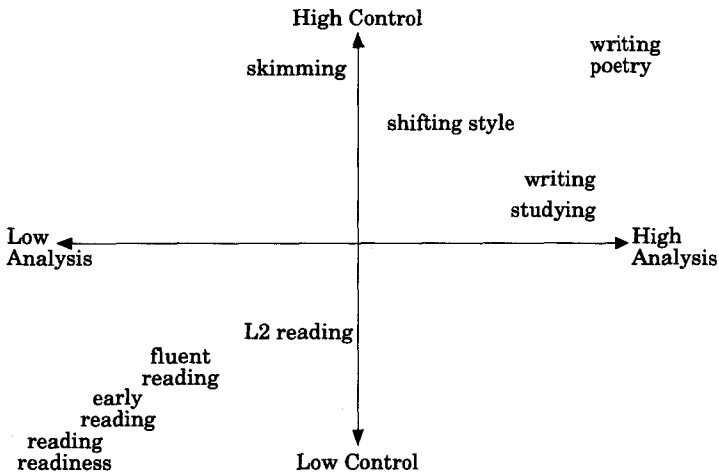
(Figure 1)

His idea gave an influence on many researchers such as Bialystock who claimed that language proficiency must include both formal structure and communicative application (2000, p. 14). He proposed a framework that considered the relation among different uses of language and their underlying cognitive requirements.



(Figure 2)

According to his theory, literacy skills such as reading and writing at different levels of competence, for different purposes, or in different genres which are based on different levels of the underlying cognitive processes.



(Figure 3)

III. Purposes of Assessing Language Proficiency

Before evaluation processes are discussed, the purposes for conducting assessment should be defined. There are different purposes to assess language proficiency in different communities and in different countries. In Japan, with both English and Japanese education, we have different purposes for needing to assess language skills; in English education, tests are mainly given for the purposes such as a) entrance examinations to schools and universities, b) placement in English classes, c) evaluation at the end of language programs, d) criterion for job promotion, and e) a tool for monitoring a student's progress in learning English. Both the Eiken Test and the TOEIC are examples of tests which are taken by students and business people nationwide.

In the case of Japanese language tests in Japan, the Nihongo Kentei Shiken is used to assess Japanese language ability and is often taken by international students as a requirement for their admission to universities in Japan. The Kanji Kentei Shiken is becoming a popular test to promote mastery of kanji at schools. As Japan is accepting more and more people from abroad, the necessity for a good framework for language evaluation increases. To meet these needs, more resources, including personnel and funds, should be diverted to the development of authentic Japanese tests.

In countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia, language tests are conducted more frequently than in Japan. These countries are accepting larger numbers of immigrants every year and schools must be able place students with different backgrounds and with various levels of competency, accordingly. Tests vary from school to school, but standardized tests are often used to assess the language skills of students. In some cases, interviews, dictation exercises, or more informal approaches may accompany standardized tests. The main purpose for educators is to be able to assess a student's proficiency so as to determine if the student's placement in the mainstream at school is feasible. Administrators need to judge whether they need to place a student in a bilingual program or an ESL class as well as to keep track of that student's progress. Such a student is referred to as a bilingual student in the UK, an

ESL (English as a second language) student in Canada, and an LEP (limited English proficiency) student in the US. These labels clearly show how immigrant students are perceived in different countries. The results of any test may affect decisions on educational programs made by the local and state governments. This matter will be discussed in greater detail further along in this paper.

IV. Review of Assessment Schemes

Thus far, competency in a second language has been discussed and the purposes for assessing language proficiency of students studying a second language have been discussed. In this section, some assessment schemes, both within Japan and outside of Japan are reviewed. The author looks into these studies, mainly in the area of bilingual education, and tries to draw useful insights from the point of view of a language teacher.

1. In Japan

In Japan, most language tests have been in the form of written exams focusing on grammar and reading comprehension. Recently, some creators of tests have started including listening comprehension sections. However, a more detailed framework to measure communication skills is badly needed. A key issue here is for administrators to ensure that the validity and the reliability of tests are maintained consistently. Educators are facing a dilemma in which they have to individualize a measurement system in order to measure the communicative competence of each learner. Methods such as interviews and role-playing activities tend to lose validity and reliability. Other problems in Japan include, securing funds, finding adequate time, facilities, and personnel to not only develop but also to implement a new assessment process. Overcoming these problems require much time and enormous efforts. In fact, Japanese educators need to start by establishing a norm of the population of learners before tests can be formulated.

2. Outside Japan

In North America, as mentioned earlier, assessment of second language proficiency has been more common than in Japan. Before 1970,

second language researchers tended to associate language abilities with mental abilities (Harley, et. al. , p. 9). Oller advocated that the concept of language development should be grasped as a part of cognitive development and conducted factor analysis for his investigation. He concluded that language proficiency was indistinguishable from intelligence (1979). Some researchers opposed Oller's views, among the opposition were Bachman and Palmer (1982). They applied confirmatory factor analysis to find that more than just one general factor could be extracted from language proficiency data (p. 9, Harley).

Cummins analyzed the use of language and suggested that it was necessary to distinguish context-embedded situations and context-reduced situations (1984). According to his studies, it usually takes more than three years to acquire the language needed in context-embedded situations that is defined as BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and more than five years to master language for context-reduced situations which is called CALP (cognitive/academic language proficiency). Based on this concept, he attempted to explore language development in various forms of instruction and adopted a 3x3 matrix measuring grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic competence in both oral and written productive models and by multiple-choice written tests. He intended to cover all of the aspects of language proficiency of learners, using both norm referenced and criterion referenced tests. As an example of his numerous studies, French immersion classes and structured French classes in Canada were compared in order to determine the effectiveness of analytical teaching and experiential teaching.

Cummin's theory helped Nakajima establish an oral interview test for Japanese children living in Ontario, Canada. Nakajima developed a scheme called OBC (Oral Proficiency Assessment for Bilingual Children), which targets bilingual Japanese and English children. OBC includes the following elements (2000):

- * Introductory conversations
- * Warming up-small games and vocabulary cards
- * Fundamental tasks-Q and A with picture cards
- * Role-playing tasks
- * Cognitive tasks-Q and A

Depending on the age and the level of the children, the interviewers may pick and choose from among these elements. A normal interview may take about ten minutes, which would seem to be a reasonable length of time for both interviewers and interviewees. The process is repeated in two languages by native speaker interviewers, who have received the necessary training beforehand. In addition to the oral test, Nakajima conducted a questionnaire survey of both children and their parents so as to obtain information regarding the use of language at home as well as a family's background. In Nakajima's study, where language development of bilingual Japanese children was explored in Canada, she looked at the development of reading ability of the children as well. Later on, OBC was expanded to test Portuguese and Chinese bilingual children in Japan which proved effective.

The strength of OBC lies in its design to analyze communication skills from three aspects: basic skills (pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, sentence structure), conversational skills (listening comprehension, willingness to engage in conversation, fluency, illocutionary strategies) and cognitive aspects (cohesion of an utterance, choice of vocabulary, knowledge of register, paragraph story telling) (p. 110). Also, efforts are being made to relax the children being interviewed and to eliminate pressure by using pictures and cards, which have been piloted to avoid cultural bias.

Though OBC was initially designed for Japanese children living in Canada, it would be worthwhile experimenting with OBC in Japan. Over the last few years, as part of the Eiken test, test takers must look at pictures and describe what they see and then answer questions about the pictures by the interviewer. In this way, improvised speech samples are drawn from the test takers. With the advancement of technology, new assessment tools may become available. For example, an interview on the Internet may become feasible in the near future.

V. Interpretation of Language Proficiency Assessment

As mentioned earlier, test results have an impact on schools as well as on communities. Especially in the States, where standardized tests are

required every year in most states, the scores of these tests are directly related to the funding of programs and to the support by the voters. ESL specialists argue that this system is disadvantageous for ESL students (Ashworth, 2000, p. 63). Even students who have just arrived in the country must take these tests, which could be a very frightening experience for such a student. Test scores are affected by many factors, and usually leave room in the interpretation of data.

In California, in opposition to the opinions of ESL specialists, Proposition 227 was approved and as a result, bilingual programs suffered cutbacks. After bilingual programs were discontinued, results of the test scores were used to justify the policy of main streaming ESL students from early stages. The New York Times reported that schools in Oceanside, California marked a sudden improvement after the bilingual programs ceased. Krashen and other specialists argued against the attitudes of the press (2001), saying that their interpretation of the data was distorted and that the mass media should pay closer attention to the numerous and widely accepted research reports, which have verified the effectiveness of well organized bilingual programs.

The results of the 2001 scores have just been released and reportedly, the scores of the Oceanside district have either dropped off or have stalled. The arguments over bilingual education will continue, but it is clear that a method for the measurement of language proficiency is, for ESL teachers and students in the United States, a serious matter which directly affects teachers, students, and parents in their daily lives.

In this paper, literature on second language proficiency has been reviewed and analyzed in terms of definition, assessment, and its impact on society. In conclusion, Japanese educators should explore authentic schemes by which various aspects of communication skills can be measured.

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